



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayechi 5772

By David Singer

January 7, 2012

Following the burial of their father Jacob in *Parshat Vayechi*, Joseph's brothers worry aloud: "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!"¹ Despite the good grace Joseph had shown them upon their reunification, the debt they owe him for having sold him into slavery so many years prior still lingers. The eleven brothers feel so burdened by this debt that they are willing to do anything—even become slaves themselves—in order to be free from it.²

Many of the medieval rabbinic commentators believed that these fears were well founded. Rabbeinu Bachya, the 14th-century Spanish scholar, notes that in all of Torah there is not one single reference to Joseph actually forgiving his brothers.³ In not ever explicitly forgiving them, Joseph allowed their debt to cast its shadow of anxiety over them in perpetuity.

Similarly, many countries in the Global South have the threat of debt casting an onerous shadow over their lands—debt owed to international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF and to wealthy countries like our own. Many of these debts were first incurred decades ago—often by corrupt or despotic regimes—in order to offset collapsing commodity prices. Paradoxically, the money that nations borrowed to support their development is now the stumbling block to progress. Because these loans incur interest greater than the amounts debtors are able to pay off, countries become stuck in an endless trap of interest payments to the West. And every penny paid by the Global South in interest payments to Western banks is money that cannot be invested in their own development and their future. They, like Joseph's brothers, are enslaved by their indebtedness.⁴

Although both situations appear bleak, the Torah provides a model for stopping the perpetuation of limitless debt. We are taught that every 50th year—called the Jubilee—all debts are to be released and all property returned to its rightful owner.⁵ The Jubilee is not a blanket free-for-all or amnesty from bad financial decisions; it is a tool for ensuring freedom from unrelenting debts, redemption from the oppression of perpetual burdens. The Jubilee year serves to regularly restore equality and equity among communities.

Taking the biblical Jubilee as its namesake, Jubilee USA, an alliance of more than 75 religious and human rights-focused groups, works to ensure the definitive cancellation of the crushing debts that loom over the heads of the world's poorest nations. Support for their work, and that of all those laboring on behalf of debt cancellation—including AJWS—is an important part of global justice activism.

¹ Genesis 50:15.

² Genesis 50:18.

³ Rabbeinu Bachya on Genesis 50:16.

⁴ For more information on the origins of international debt, see <http://www.jubileeusa.org/resources/debt-resources/beginners-guide-to-debt/how-it-all-began.html>.

⁵ Leviticus 25.

The impact of debt relief is profound: debt cancellation allows developing nations to focus on the provision of basic human needs such as education and health care for their citizens. For example, debt cancellation in Uganda resulted in a doubling of school enrollment; in Mozambique it allowed for the vaccination of five hundred thousand children.⁶ In Haiti, forgiveness of bilateral debt to the U.S. and the International Monetary Fund has enabled the country to better focus on recovering from the 2010 earthquake.

Unfortunately, Joseph never forgave his brothers' debt to him, and the enduring acrimony and fear was a stumbling block for the rest of their lives. As many of us have experienced in our own personal relationships, we can never fully move on until we completely let go of our claims to the past. We cannot be released from the burden of regret until those to whom we are indebted forgive us explicitly. The same is true in a global context. May we learn from Joseph and his brothers' experience, and work to free developing nations from the oppression of debt, building towards a better and brighter future for the entire planet.



David Singer is a fifth-year rabbinical student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles, where he concentrates his studies in Philosophy and serves as assistant director of the Rabbinic Management Institute. A native of California, David earned his BA in history at University of California, Berkeley. He has spent two years studying in Israel, most recently at Jerusalem's Conservative Yeshiva. He teaches and writes frequently, and was awarded the 2011 Whizin Prize in Jewish Ethics. David can be reached at DavidAJWS@gmail.com.

⁶ For more information, visit http://ajws.org/emergencies/debt_campaign.html.

©2012 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.